

Mehregan **An Old Iranian Festival**

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Iranians have celebrated *Mehregân*, the autumnal festival through ages. It falls on the day of Mehr in the month of Mehr in the Iranian (Fasli) calendar. It is October 2nd (October 1st in the leap year) on that festive day. Let us trace its history.

Thousands of years ago, a pastoral people, who called themselves Aryan (noble), inhabited the high and lowlands of central Asia, now politically divided into Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, and the Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. They called this vast land *Airyanâm Shayana*, the Abode of Aryans, a name, first contracted into *Eran-shahr* (Aryan-land) and still later *Iran*.

Avestan scriptures describe the land as having high mountains, wide valleys, rapid streams, navigable rivers, deep lakes, a long-shore sea, and vast pastures. It was a very hospitable land in those days. That is why the Avesta imparts a buoyant spirit as the people lived, more or less, in peace and prosperity.

The Aryans believed in a multitude of gods and goddesses. They ascribed their peace and prosperity to these deities. Ahura Vouruna* (Vedic Asura Varuna) was the chief god, King of the Universe. Like a kind but strict father, he had his discipline. He had a younger associate, almost a twin. His name was Mithra (Vedic Mitra). His name is derived from the root *mith-*, 'to meet, to unite, to form a union'. He was, as the name also shows, the god of contract and covenant. He supervised the bond that bound various Aryan tribes together in their pastoral pattern. Each tribe knew its grazing limits on the grasslands. The law of grazing, when and where, was very clear to let the tribes live and let live in their successive migrations for summer and winter grazing grounds. Nomadic tribes still follow the pattern in the region. That is why Mithra was preferably invoked by his pastoral epithet, *vourugaoyaoiti* (Vedic *urugavyuti*), meaning "(lord) of wide pastures." He was the lord of cow-herding Aryans. He held them in a covenant, a bond of friendship. He was a friend. As an abstract, *mithra-* means contract, covenant, love, friendship.

Since a contract breaker (*mithra-druj*) was punished by the society in the name of Mithra, he evolved into a judge also. When a tribe broke a contract, it was a punitive war that could correct the tribe. This made Mithra into a warlord. Love, lordship, judgment, and war combined to elevate him to be the most popular god, a god much revered and much feared. He was, as the Avesta shows, very kind and generous to those who kept the contract but very harsh and ruthless to those who broke it. He was all-kindness to friends and no-mercy to enemies, a typical Aryan warlord. Therefore, the favorite of the ruling and warrior class.

A study of Rig Veda, the Avesta, and the Iranian calendar shows that Vouruna and Mithra shared certain things among various tribes. For some, Vouruna ruled at night and Mithra during day. For others, Vouruna presided during first half of the year and Mithra the second half. Spring belonged to the chief god and the fall to his associate. The first month and the first day of the month were named after the elder and the seventh month and the 16th day to the younger. The

Zoroastrian calendar reform has allotted the first month to the Departed as *Farvardin*, but retained the first day of the month in honor of *Hormazd*. The Supreme Being has, however, more days and a separate month. *Dathvah* (modern Persian *Dey*, Gujarati *Dai*), meaning “the Creator,” are the 8th, 15th and 23rd days of a month and the 10th month. As far as Mithra is concerned, the seventh and the 16th day remain unchanged, dedicated to *Mehr*. He does not have any additional day.

Since pastoral life begins at dawn, Mithra became associated with light—an association that made him, centuries later, synonymous with sun. While in Avesta and Pahlavi, the name is associated with contract and justice, in modern Persian, *Mehr* (for this is the contracted form now) has evolved to stand for both friendship and sun.

Mithra and other gods and goddesses had all their reverences and invocational songs until Asho Zarathushtra came with his dynamic message of monotheism. The Gathas know only Mazda Ahura, literally the ‘Super-Intellect Essence’ or with a free rendering the Supreme Intelligent Being and therefore, God Wise. Ahura Mazda is the continuous creator, sustainer and promoter of the universe. None of the gods and goddesses of the old pantheon are mentioned—not even in contempt. Why mention a name that does not exist!

Some would say, one should not expect all these names in a small bunch of seventeen songs! But these very songs of 241 stanzas mention Ahura Mazda approximately 190 times, and the abstract Primal Principles of Life (later called *amesha spentas*, ‘Immortal Progressives’) righteousness (*asha*) 150 times, good mind (*vothu manah*) 110 times, dominion (*khshathra*) 50 times, serenity (*âramaiti*) 40 times, progressive mentality (*spenta mainyu*) 15 times, perfection (*haurvatât*) 11 times, immortality (*ameretât*) 11 times, inspiration (*seraosha*) 8 times, and many more between one and six times. And in spite of the complaints in some of the martial yashts that people do not mention certain yazatas by name, the Gathas remain silent. They are also not mentioned in any of the other texts in the Gathic dialect—the *Fravarti*, (Yasna 11.17–14.2), *Haptanghâiti* (Yasna 35–41), *Sarosh Hadokht* (Yasna 56), *Fshusho Mânthra* (Yasna 58), and *Yenghe Hâtâm*. It is outside the Gathic texts that the names of Aryan deities appear and that too in narrations by unknown third persons, who relate the conversations between Ahura Mazda and Zarathushtra, a clever way to reintroduce the old deities.

Age-old-engraved-in beliefs and customs do not die. They outlived the purifying movement by Zarathushtra. Mithra and other gods and goddesses were re-introduced as *yazatas*, ‘adorables’. The Younger Avesta has preserved songs in their honor—some pre-Zarathushtrian, some post-Zarathushtrian, but all in their Zoroastrianized editions. They are beautiful pieces of literature with a martial air. Furthermore, with the exception of a few, all non-Gathic Yasna sections, certain Vispered chapters and other liturgical pieces have the names of one or more yazatas mentioned in a, more or less, monotonous reverential way.

However, there is no mention of a colorful festival in honor of Mithra in any part of the Avesta... Odd and yet true. But this very Avesta has a place to define and determine *Gâhânbârs*, the six seasonal festivals of the Zarathushtrian times. Nevertheless, the Mithraic festival has survived with all its pomp through sheer custom. It is mostly reported about in post-Sassanian writings of Muslim Iranians.

Here are some of the reasons for its survival: It has an age-old pastoral beginning. It made the tribes leave the piling grasslands and return to their winter residences. Food and fodder were to be restored and cattle were to be mated. Fallow land was to be prepared, and fruit trees were to be pruned, all to prepare for the spring. With Mithra as their champion deity, the warrior class, the rulers, had adopted it as one of the two top festivals, the other being Nowruz, the New Year festival of vernal equinox. The Zarathushtrian festival in autumn, it should be pointed out, is *Ayâthrema saredha* (Persian and Gujarati *Ayathrem Gahanbar*). It is celebrated from October 13 to 17.

The Achaemenians are reported to have celebrated their *Mithrakana*, particularly because *Bagayadi*, the month of god-worship, was the month in which Darius the Great rose and killed Gaumata, reportedly the pretender who had usurped the throne. Bagayadi is the same month of Mithra/Mehr, the seventh month of the year. The event took place in 522 B.C., in the same week the festival falls. It is reported that Achaemenian kings avoided drinking in open, but the festival was an exception.

The Parthians and the Sassanians also celebrated the occasion with all the royal pomp and glory. The king wore a sun-disc crown and a special dress. A special herald greeted him with the glad tidings of a bright future. A priest performed elaborate rites. People brought him gifts and in return were generously rewarded. A Royal banquet was laid as colorfully as possible with flowers, fruits, food, and flavors. Festivities were held throughout the empire, both by the rich and the poor.

So deep-rooted was the custom that it held itself even after the Arab conquest of Iran. Although Islam had replaced Zoroastrianism as the state religion, the Umayyid and Abbasid caliphs sat in glory to receive gifts from their Iranian subjects. Mehregan bloomed forth as soon as Muslim kings of Iranian culture ascended the throne. There are many poems in Arabic and Persian composed on the occasion by court poets where they describe the celebrations.

Mehregan is celebrated today by most Iranians, even those in diaspora. A special table is laid with the fire vase or an incense burner, a copy of the Khordeh Avesta, a mirror for self-reflection, water the source of life, various grains for prosperity, fruits and flowers, sweets, wine, and coins. And candles. A priest recites appropriate prayers, especially Mehr Neyâyesh. A talk is given to signify the occasion. A poem is read to glorify the festival. Food is consumed and those present dance to the tune of music until late in the night.
